

REMARKS  
FOR THE  
SMALLPOX ERADICATION CELEBRATION

BY  
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THANK YOU DR. MASON. IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE HERE TODAY TO CELEBRATE THIS MILESTONE IN PUBLIC HEALTH, THE ELIMINATION OF A DISEASE FOR WHICH THERE WAS NO CURE, A DISEASE THAT HAD KILLED MORE PEOPLE THAN ALL THE WARS IN HISTORY. THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION CAMPAIGN PROBABLY WAS THE MOST AMBITIOUS UNDERTAKING IN THE HISTORY OF MEDICINE.

LETTER TO HALFDAN T. MAHLER, M.D., DIRECTOR-GENERAL, WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION, 1211 GENEVA 27, SWITZERLAND FROM PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN, DATED OCTOBER 26, 1987.

QUOTE. "DEAR DR. MAHLER:

ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT, I AM PROUD TO TAKE THIS OCCASION TO MARK THE TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S SUCCESSFUL PROGRAM TO ERADICATE SMALLPOX, AND TO CONGRATULATE YOU ON YOUR LEADERSHIP IN THAT EFFORT.

SMALLPOX WAS ONCE CONSIDERED TO BE "TOO INSIDIOUS TO ERADICATE." ITS ELIMINATION IS AN OUTSTANDING EXAMPLE OF WHAT CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED BY MANKIND WHEN NATIONS WORK TOGETHER TOWARD A COMMON GOAL. I AM PARTICULARLY PROUD OF THE ROLE THE UNITED STATES PLAYED IN THIS FIGHT IN PARTNERSHIP WITH THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION AND OTHER NATIONS. THE SUCCESS OF THE ERADICATION CAMPAIGN SERVES TO REMIND US ALL THAT INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION IS INVALUABLE FOR BATTLING AND SOLVING COMMON PROBLEMS.

THOMAS JEFFERSON SAID, "FUTURE GENERATIONS WILL KNOW ONLY BY HISTORY ALONE THAT THE LOATHSOME SMALLPOX HAS EXISTED." THE TRUTH OF HIS PREDICTION STRENGTHENS OUR CONVICTION TODAY, AS WE CONFRONT THE NEW GLOBAL PANDEMIC OF AIDS, THAT THIS DISEASE TOO WILL BE RELEGATED TO THE DUSTHEAP OF HISTORY.

DR. MAHLER, PLEASE ACCEPT MY HEARTFELT GRATITUDE FOR THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT, WHICH HAS SAVED COUNTLESS LIVES FROM THE RAVAGES OF THIS DREADFUL DISEASE.

SIGNED SINCERELY, RONALD REAGAN." UNQUOTE

IT IS PROPERLY DESCRIBED AS HAVING HEROIC DIMENSIONS. IT BEGAN WITH A SOVIET RESOLUTION AT THE WORLD HEALTH ASSEMBLY IN 1958 TO THE EFFECT THAT SMALLPOX COULD THEORETICALLY BE ELIMINATED. THE FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE CDC, DAVID SENCER, SHARED THIS BELIEF AND WAS INSTRUMENTAL IN MAKING IT HAPPEN.

IN 1964 THE FAMOUS JET GUN THAT WAS ONE OF THE KEY ELEMENTS IN THE SUCCESS WAS TESTED BY THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL IN WHAT COULD BE CALLED A DRESS REHEARSAL IN BRAZIL. AND IN 1966 THE CAMPAIGN BEGAN IN EARNEST.

I SAID THE CAMPAIGN COULD PROPERLY BE DESCRIBED AS HEROIC. IN 1966 SMALLPOX WAS RAGING THROUGH SOUTH AMERICA, ASIA, AND AFRICA. TWO AND A HALF MILLION PEOPLE WERE REPORTED AS INFECTED IN 30 COUNTRIES, A FIGURE ESTIMATED TO BE ABOUT ONE PERCENT OF THE ACTUAL INCIDENCE. BUT HUNDREDS OF PUBLIC HEALTH PRACTITIONERS--WHITE AND BLACK, ARAB AND JEW, RUSSIAN AND AMERICAN--WORKED SIDE BY SIDE TO RID HUMANITY OF THE SCOURGE.

IN THE AFRICAN CAMPAIGN, IT IS ESTIMATED THEY WORKED WITH ABOUT 4,000 LOCAL HEALTH WORKERS. AND, I MIGHT ADD, THE SMALLPOX CAMPAIGN WOULD NOT HAVE WORKED WERE IT NOT A GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGN. IT WAS ESSENTIAL THAT INDIGENOUS PUBLIC HEALTH WORKERS BE INVOLVED IN THE CAMPAIGN IF IT WAS TO GAIN THE COOPERATION OF LOCAL PEOPLE NECESSARY FOR SUCCESS.

THE EXPERIENCE GATHERED BY BOTH THE AMERICANS AND THEIR OVERSEAS COLLEAGUES WAS INVALUABLE. FOR THE UNITED STATES, IT EXTENDED OUR PUBLIC HEALTH NETWORK INTERNATIONALLY, PERMITTING US TO HELP OUR FRIENDS OVERSEAS. AND FOR THOSE WHO WORKED SO HARD WITH US, THE EXPERIENCE HELPED BUILD THE PUBLIC HEALTH INFRASTRUCTURE NECESSARY TO PREVENT OTHER EPIDEMICS.

THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION'S EXPANDED PROGRAM ON IMMUNIZATION IS AN OUTGROWTH OF THE EFFORT TO ERADICATE SMALLPOX. THIS TOO HAS BEEN ENORMOUSLY SUCCESSFUL. WHEREAS, IN THE EARLY 1970'S IMMUNIZATIONS WERE ALMOST UNHEARD OF IN MANY PARTS OF THE WORLD, COVERAGE IS NOW AROUND 40 PERCENT. AN ANCILLARY BENEFIT TO THE UNITED STATES FROM THESE PROGRAMS IS THAT AS DISEASE RATES IN THE REST OF THE WORLD GO DOWN, THE RISK OF IMPORTATION INTO THE UNITED STATES DECREASES.

MANY OF NOTABLE EVENTS ARE SCHEDULED FOR TODAY. ONE OF THE HIGHLIGHTS IS DR. D. A. HENDERSON'S DELIVERY OF THE JOSEPH W. MOUNTAIN LECTURE. BACK IN 1977, D. A. WAS ON THE TELEVISION QUIZ SHOW, "TO TELL THE TRUTH". THE FOUR PANELISTS HAD TO GUESS WHO OF THREE PEOPLE WAS THE REAL DONALD HENDERSON. WELL, THREE PEOPLE GUESSED WRONG. BUT I ASSURE YOU, WE HAVE THE REAL MCCOY FOR YOU TODAY.

IT IS MY PLEASURE TO BE HERE AS SURGEON GENERAL TO PRESENT 309 AWARDS TO THOSE OF YOU WHO PARTICIPATED IN THIS MARVELOUS ACHIEVEMENT. DR. DONALD MILLAR, WHO LED THE EARLY VACCINATION AND JET INJECTOR STUDIES IN BRAZIL IN 1973 AND THEN DIRECTED THE WHO/CDC EFFORT IN WEST AFRICA WILL ACCEPT THE REPRESENTATIVE CAMPAIGN RIBBON ON BEHALF OF THE 110 MEMBERS OF THE COMMISSIONED CORPS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SMALLPOX CAMPAIGN. AND JANE COOLEY, WHO HANDLED TRAVEL AND ADMINISTRATIVE DETAILS FOR THE CDC TEAM, WILL ACCEPT THE REPRESENTATIVE SURGEON GENERAL'S CERTIFICATE OF APPRECIATION ON BEHALF OF THE 199 CIVIL SERVANTS WHO PARTICIPATED.



I WOULD LIKE ALL THE MEMBERS OF BOTH GROUPS WHOSE NAMES ARE LISTED IN THE PROGRAM TO STAND UP AND BE RECOGNIZED. THOSE WHO ARE HERE TODAY CAN PICK UP THEIR CERTIFICATES AND RIBBONS IN THE LOBBY AFTER THE LECTURE. THOSE WHO ARE UNABLE TO BE WITH US TODAY WILL RECEIVE THEM BY MAIL.

THANK YOU ALL FOR YOUR FINE WORK.